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ABSTRACT

IN THE SPRING OF 1968, A JOINT STUDY GROUP CALLED AN AD HOC COMMITTEE ON GRADES AND EVALUATION WAS CREATED TO EXAMINE CURRENT METHCDS OF STUDENT EVALUATION. SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE GROUP BELIEVED THAT LETTER GRADING CN THE UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE LEVELS WAS CCUNTERPRCDUCTIVE, BECAUSE GRADES DO NOT ACCURATELY REFLECT EITHER STUDENT PERFORMANCE CR CAPABILITY, AND THEY CORRUPT THE LEARNING SITUATION, BECAUSE THE POWER TO GRADE PUTS THE ULTIMATE WEAPON IN THE HANDS OF THE FACULTY AND THUS CONSTITUTES A FORM OF TYRANNY. CTHER CRITICS CHARGED THAT THE PRESENT SYSTEM PREVENTS AN INDIVIDUAL STUDENT FRCM INTEGRATING HIS COURSES, SEMINARS, AND INDEPENDENT STUDY INTO A MEANINGFUL WHOLE. STRONGEST OBJECTION CAME FROM STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES WHERE THE ELEMENT OF SUBJECTIVITY IS HARDER TO ELIMINATE. THOUGH THE FACULTY HAS LEARNED TC READ TRANSCRIPTS WITH CAUTION, STUDENTS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC TEND TC TAKE GRADES AT FACE VALUE, AWARE THAT MANY OF THE REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS OF ACADEMIC LIFE ARE DISTRIBUTED ON A VERY PRECISE CALCULATION OF ACADEMIC AVERAGES. WHILE THE COMMITTEE MEMBERS ARE FULLY AWARE OF THE MANY ADVANTAGES OF THE TRADITIONAL GRADING SYSTEM, THEY WILL RECCMMEND A DRASTIC REDUCTION IN THE AMCUNT OF LETTER GRADING AND ENCOURAGE ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF EVALUATING STUDENTS. (AF)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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GRADING AND STUDENT EVALUATION

David S. Sparks, Associate Dean
University of Maryland
December 5, 1969

In my first draft of these remarks I gave them the optimistic title of "Grading and Student Evaluation: A Progress Report." On second thought I have concluded that discretion is preferable to audacity and I have shortened my title to simply "Grading and Student Evaluation." I leave the question of progress to you.

Late last spring I received a call from President Arlt. He reported the creation of a joint study group to be called an Ad Hoc Committee on Grades and Evaluation. It was to have representation from the Association of American Colleges, the American Association of University Professors, the United States National Student Association, the Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, as well as from the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States. Dr. Arlt asked if I would join with him and Dean Wesley J. Dale in representing the Council. Confessing to no particular competence on the matter I admitted that I believed the subject an important one. Brushing aside my disclaimer Dr. Arlt promptly interpreted my expression of interest as an acceptance of the assignment. I have rarely been subjected to such efficient yet elegant arm-twisting. He didn't even give me time to express my suspicion that he found me a likely candidate largely because I live in the suburbs of Washington and would therefore be able to meet with the Committee at much less cost in time and energy than would be required of abler men who lived farther away.

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My remarks today constitute a brief review of the work of the joint study group and are intended to prepare you, in some degree, for the report of the Ad Hoc Committee which will be ready for distribution in the not too distant future. I very much hope that many of you will use the discussion period following this panel presentation to provide us with added perspectives which we may communicate to the Committee as it nears the conclusion of its deliberations.

Both the subject for our panel discussion this evening and the participation of the Council in the work of the Ad Hoc Committee grew out of the concern that many of you expressed in your responses to the request of Dean Rhoades for guidance for his Committee on Policies and Plans which he circulated last March. Several of you expressed particular interest in the growing number of proposals for pass-fail grading at the graduate level. Others believe that the entire question of grading ought to be explored. A few wanted to hear a discussion of the larger issues in over-all evaluation of students.

Still disclaiming any particular competence in this field I find that my service on the Ad Hoc Committee and the review of the literature it has entailed, have left me with some impressions and reactions I would like to share with you.

Several members of our Committee, most particularly our Chairman, Professor Neill Megaw, who is also Chairman of the English Department at the University of Texas, Austin, President Edward J. Bloustein of Bennington College, and the student members of our group, are persuaded that our present grading practices have reached the crisis stage. While they focus largely on the grading of undergraduate students they believe that letter grading at the graduate level may be equally counter-productive and corruptive of the learning

situation.

Before attempting to summarize the indictment of letter grading as it stands at present, I would make the point that while the severest critics of present practices are undergraduate students, and those who speak for them, very serious concern is also being expressed by a great many administrators and faculty members. Among the latter are scholars and researchers whose credentials in the fields of human learning and cognition, psychology, testing, and measurement give special weight to their opinions and demands for reform.

At the risk of oversimplification I believe that the charges against letter grading, and the consequent search for alternatives, can be summarized in two broad categories. The first is that they do not accurately reflect either student performance or capability. Moreover, they are regularly used by our schools and society generally in determining the allocation of opportunities and rewards on the false assumption that they report something specific and significant about past performance and future success. Secondly, it is charged that letter grading seriously impedes and may corrupt the learning process.

The charge that our grades do not accurately reflect either performance, or even potential for performance, is familiar to all of us. Only the intensity with which the charge is pressed is new. We are also familiar with the great variations among us in our degree of faith in our grading practices. It is common wisdom that faculty and students in the natural sciences and engineering, particularly in those areas where the emphasis is on the transmission of information and the acquisition of skills, have more confidence in the objectivity and

hence, the accuracy, of conventional grades than do those in the humanities and the social sciences where grades are more likely to contain elements of subjectivity. It should occasion no surprise, therefore, to learn that letter grades are being most vigorously attacked by students and scholars in the social sciences, humanities, and the creative and performing arts.

As academicians we are all familiar with the fact that a "B" grade from one institution means quite a different thing from a similar grade at others. More, we are aware that similar grades mean different things in different departments of the same institution, and even differ from professor to professor. Long familiar with these variables we tend to accept them as a fact of academic life, make the necessary allowances and discounts, and proceed with the business of intelligently interpreting the transcripts that come our way.

Students and the public, however, tend to take grades at face value, and rightly so. They know that many of the rewards and punishments of academic life are distributed on very precise calculation of academic averages. From experience that is frequently bitter, they have learned that admission to professional schools, graduate schools, and advanced standing within their own colleges is too frequently determined on the basis of average grades calculated to the second decimal point. Deny it as we will, we all know of cases in which a student was denied admission, a scholarship, a fellowship, or some academic honor on the ground that his average was too low. We know that in such cases there is usually other evidence of a lack of satisfactory performance contained in a letter from a faculty member, a low test score, or inadequate preparation in a necessary pre-requisite. This information is, however, rarely communicated

to the student and when it is he is not inclined to believe it. And, in spite of our growing awareness of the deficiencies in our current practices in measuring either academic excellence or potential, many institutions, including my own, carry on their books rigid requirements for admission and retention based upon average grades.

While all of us within the educational enterprise have learned to read transcripts with great caution, and to rely on letters of recommendation, test scores, interviews, personality profiles, and the student's own statement of purpose, to supplement our judgments of individual students, academic requirements based on average grades appear all through our catalogs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The result has been, in the language of the day, a growing credibility gap.

The second charge against our current grading practices is, to my mind, less serious, but it is one that is being heard with increasing frequency and growing stridency. In support of the charge that the power to grade is the ultimate weapon in the hands of the faculty to determine the content of the curriculum and the course, to determine what is "relevant" for the student to learn, opponents of the present system argue that it constitutes an intolerable form of tyranny over the minds of students. Learning takes place, they contend, only in an atmosphere of complete and mutual trust between teacher and learner. Open discussion, tolerance of divergent opinions, and originality can flourish, critics say, only when the power of the instructor to coerce the students is removed.

Resisting the temptation to adopt the stance of the neutral administrator in a fight between faculty and students, a situation in which a Dean can only catch

it from both sides, I venture the opinion that there is more heat than substance to this charge. Putting aside the autocrat of the classroom who can brook no dissent from his carefully wrought opinions as an anachronism and an academic casualty, I believe that this charge is not well founded and concerns a relatively few students. I would also point out that those making this charge rather regularly suggest that the situation will be improved by the simple device of giving the student the power to grade the instructor. Unless I am mistaken students have been grading their instructors ever since the introduction of the elective system through their choice of courses. Moreover, the practice of evaluating and grading members of the faculty through the use of published course guides is spreading very rapidly.

One part of the charge that present grading practices corrupt the education enterprise does, it seems to me, to have particular force. It is argued by the more moderate critics that the present system prevents an individual student from integrating his courses, seminars, and independent study into a meaningful whole. Both faculty and students at present are encouraged to view education in bits and pieces that are readily combined only in the ubiquitous and misleading "grade point average." Too frequently both the student and the instructor treat both the in-course grade and the final course grade as money in the bank to be drawn upon to make up deficits resulting from low performance on subsequent examinations, or other assignments or courses.

I think it small wonder our students and to a lesser extent our faculty and administrators, have adopted the "Grade Point Average Perspective" described by Becker, Geer, and Hughes in their study of the University of Kansas, a perspective which led them to recommend the total abolition of grading.[1]

While I believe that the evidence supporting such a recommendation is far from conclusive, I confess to considerable uneasiness when I note that our campus computers rival those in our metropolitan banks and that they perform a very similar function in keeping track of the grades deposited by students, printing out on command the accumulated balances. I wonder how long it will be before someone suggests that the only remaining difference between the two, the payment of interest, ought to be erased. Seriously, however, I believe we should welcome the opportunity provided by the Ad Hoc Committee and panels such as this one, to probe the implications for education of our present grading practices.

Turning back to the work of the Committee I believe that you can be confident that its members are fully cognizant of the necessity for retaining rigorous and continuous procedures for evaluating students. Its members know, for example, that grading was originally resorted to in an effort to make judgments of student performance on the basis of merit, not status; that in doing so we were attempting to advance the democratic principle of equality of opportunity and limit the influence of family connections, "cronyism," religion, and race in the management of educational enterprise. They are also aware of the importance of grading in the unending effort to identify the encourage talent, as well as to reinforce learning by rewarding exceptional performance. They know very well the importance of grading in the allocation of scarce resources and educational opportunities among those who will make optimal use of them. They are also cognizant of the diagnostic utility of grades in assisting the individual student in making judgments about his interests, performance, capabilities, and his educational goals. They are equally aware with the importance of grades to the

teacher who uses them to diagnose his own effectiveness in the classroom, or laboratory, and to the institution as it attempts to make decisions about curricula, the levels at which certain materials should be taught, for how long, and in what sequence. Finally, the members of the Committee are persuaded, as I am sure you are, of the importance of grading in the assistance it provides society beyond the schools in the selection and utilization of the wide range of interests and talents possessed by our graduates.

While I believe it would be inappropriate for me, pending the completion of the Committee's report, to communicate its recommendations in any detail, I do believe that you ought to be alerted to the fact that the report will be coming to you in the near future and that it will contain a series of recommendations to us to drastically reduce the amount of letter grading we presently do, and to vigorously experiment with alternative methods of evaluating students, including pass/fail, credit/no credit, variable weighting, super-grades, and selected G. P.A.

I believe the Report will have my full support. I hope that it will be able to earn yours.

[1] Howard S. Becker, Blanche Geer, Everett Hughes, Making the Grade: The Academic Side of College Life (John Wiley and Sons, 1968).